

ALASKA STATE LEGISLATURE
HOUSE SPECIAL COMMITTEE ON MILITARY AND VETERANS' AFFAIRS

April 27, 2021

1:04 p.m.

MEMBERS PRESENT

Representative Chris Tuck, Chair
Representative Andi Story
Representative Geran Tarr
Representative Matt Claman
Representative George Rauscher
Representative David Nelson

MEMBERS ABSENT

Representative Laddie Shaw

COMMITTEE CALENDAR

SENATE BILL NO. 40

"An Act relating to veterans' benefits services and veterans' benefits appeal services."

- MOVED SB 40 OUT OF COMMITTEE

HOUSE JOINT RESOLUTION NO. 16

Encouraging the United States Congress to pass legislation granting the Hmong veterans of the Vietnam War access to the same veteran benefits received by United States veterans.

- MOVED HJR 16 OUT OF COMMITTEE

PREVIOUS COMMITTEE ACTION

BILL: SB 40

SHORT TITLE: VETERANS' BENEFITS SERVICES; DISCLOSURE

SPONSOR(s): SENATOR(s) REVAK

01/25/21	(S)	PREFILE RELEASED 1/15/21
01/25/21	(S)	READ THE FIRST TIME - REFERRALS
01/25/21	(S)	STA, L&C
03/04/21	(S)	STA AT 3:30 PM BUTROVICH 205
03/04/21	(S)	Heard & Held
03/04/21	(S)	MINUTE(STA)
03/11/21	(S)	STA AT 3:30 PM BUTROVICH 205
03/11/21	(S)	Heard & Held

03/11/21	(S)	MINUTE (STA)
03/18/21	(S)	STA AT 3:30 PM BUTROVICH 205
03/18/21	(S)	Moved SB 40 Out of Committee
03/18/21	(S)	MINUTE (STA)
03/19/21	(S)	STA RPT 4DP
03/19/21	(S)	DP: SHOWER, HOLLAND, COSTELLO, REINBOLD
03/19/21	(S)	OBJECTION (REGARDING REPORTING OUT OF COMMITTEE PROCESS)
03/19/21	(S)	POSTPONE QUESTION TO MARCH 24 Y14 N2 E3 A1
03/22/21	(S)	OBJECTION WITHDRAWN (REGARDING REPORTING OUT OF COMMITTEE PROCESS)
03/29/21	(S)	L&C AT 1:30 PM BELTZ 105 (TSBldg)
03/29/21	(S)	Moved SB 40 Out of Committee
03/29/21	(S)	MINUTE (L&C)
03/31/21	(S)	L&C RPT 5DP
03/31/21	(S)	DP: COSTELLO, REVAK, GRAY-JACKSON, HOLLAND, STEVENS
04/09/21	(S)	TRANSMITTED TO (H)
04/09/21	(S)	VERSION: SB 40
04/12/21	(H)	READ THE FIRST TIME - REFERRALS
04/12/21	(H)	MLV, L&C
04/22/21	(H)	MLV AT 1:00 PM GRUENBERG 120
04/22/21	(H)	Heard & Held
04/22/21	(H)	MINUTE (MLV)
04/27/21	(H)	MLV AT 1:00 PM GRUENBERG 120

BILL: HJR 16

SHORT TITLE: HMONG VETERANS MILITARY RIGHTS

SPONSOR(S): REPRESENTATIVE(S) NELSON

04/09/21	(H)	READ THE FIRST TIME - REFERRALS
04/09/21	(H)	MLV
04/22/21	(H)	MLV AT 1:00 PM GRUENBERG 120
04/22/21	(H)	Heard & Held
04/22/21	(H)	MINUTE (MLV)
04/27/21	(H)	MLV AT 1:00 PM GRUENBERG 120

WITNESS REGISTER

SENATOR JOSH REVAK
Alaska State Legislature
Juneau, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: As prime sponsor, provided information during the hearing on SB 40.

CHRISTOPHER BLOCK

Anchorage, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in support of SB 40.

MAI XIONG

Anchorage, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in support of HJR 16.

VERDIE BOWEN, Director of Veterans Affairs

Office of Veterans Affairs

Department of Military and Veterans Affairs

Anchorage, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Provided information and answered questions during the hearing on HJR 16.

ACTION NARRATIVE

[1:04:18 PM](#)

CHAIR CHRIS TUCK called the House Special Committee on Military and Veterans' Affairs meeting to order at 1:04 p.m. Representatives Nelson, Story, Claman, Rauscher, Tarr, and Tuck were present at the call to order.

SB 40-VETERANS' BENEFITS SERVICES; DISCLOSURE

[1:05:09 PM](#)

CHAIR TUCK announced that the first order of business would be SENATE BILL NO. 40, "An Act relating to veterans' benefits services and veterans' benefits appeal services."

[1:05:30 PM](#)

SENATOR JOSH REVAK, Alaska State Legislature, as prime sponsor, thanked the committee for hearing SB 40 and noted that this bill is for consumer protections for veterans.

[1:05:53 PM](#)

CHAIR TUCK opened public testimony on SB 40.

[1:06:16 PM](#)

CHRISTOPHER BLOCK testified in support of SB 40. He said that he is a disabled Air Force veteran who has worked through the Veterans Administration process since 2006. He described his expenses for accessing benefits and expressed his belief that SB

40 would help many veterans. He said that even well-educated veterans need the protection that SB 40 would provide.

1:09:37 PM

CHAIR TUCK asked Mr. Block how he knew about this proposed legislation.

MR. BLOCK replied that he sits on the Anchorage Chamber of Commerce and is very involved in anything concerning veterans.

1:10:44 PM

REPRESENTATIVE TARR asked Mr. Block whether he believes the fine of \$1,000 per violation would be appropriate, given how much money he had spent on veterans' benefits providers.

MR. BLOCK explained that the provider he used retained a percentage of the benefit as payment. He said that companies may not be deterred by a fine of \$1,000, but that getting the information out is an important step in the process.

REPRESENTATIVE TARR said that she has often visited organizations such as Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW) and American Legion and noted that membership in those organizations is "on the older side." She asked Mr. Block whether he had any thoughts on getting younger veterans involved in the organizations.

MR. BLOCK replied that since leaving active duty and being involved with disabled veterans, he's noticed the age gap and difficulty in reaching younger veterans. He said that even with involvement in Disabled Veterans of America and Wounded Warrior Project it's difficult to connect, and he's noticed that veterans of Operation Enduring Freedom haven't been able to connect with the VFW or American Legion the way those of the Vietnam War have. He said that it would be helpful to be able to access information outside of the Veteran Services Organizations.

1:17:26 PM

CHAIR TUCK, after ascertaining that no one else wished to testify, closed public testimony on SB 40.

1:17:52 PM

REPRESENTATIVE TARR moved to report SB 40 out of committee with individual recommendations and the accompanying zero fiscal note. There being no objection, SB 40 was reported out of the House Special Committee on Military and Veterans' Affairs.

HJR 16-HMONG VETERANS MILITARY RIGHTS

[1:18:35 PM](#)

CHAIR TUCK announced that the final order of business would be HOUSE JOINT RESOLUTION NO. 16, "Encouraging the United States Congress to pass legislation granting the Hmong veterans of the Vietnam War access to the same veteran benefits received by United States veterans."

[1:19:17 PM](#)

CHAIR TUCK opened public testimony on HJR 16.

[1:19:34 PM](#)

MAI XIONG testified in support of HJR 16. She said that it's been more than 40 years since the promise was made and many Hmong veterans have died.

[1:21:20 PM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE TARR thanked Ms. Xiong.

[1:21:36 PM](#)

CHAIR TUCK, after ascertaining that no one else wished to testify, closed public testimony on HJR 16.

[1:21:54 PM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE TARR directed her question to Mr. Bowen and asked whether he knew the number of Hmong veterans who have received some sort of benefit.

[1:22:46 PM](#)

VERDIE BOWEN, Director of Veterans Affairs, Office of Veterans Affairs, Department of Military and Veterans Affairs, replied that 82 Hmong veterans have received documents to get a driver's license. He said that the Hmong veterans are passing away, so the sooner they're able to obtain benefits, the better.

CHAIR TUCK expressed his agreement and noted the high mortality rate of Hmong soldiers in battle, and he said, "We couldn't have done it without them."

[1:24:06 PM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE RAUSCHER said that he supports the bill but questions the existence of a "promise" to the Hmong soldiers, and suggested that extension of veterans' benefits was a "concept" instead of a "promise." He expressed his belief in what HJR 16 is trying to accomplish.

CHAIR TUCK asked Representative Rauscher whether he was looking for a document expressing the commitment of the U.S. military to the Hmong.

REPRESENTATIVE RAUSCHER said, "I've been trying to find something that points to the fact that we made a promise somewhere, other than a statement ... half a century later." He stated his belief that the intention of HJR 16 is important, deserved, and long-overdue. He said, "The one 'Whereas' in there just seems to bother me a little bit."

CHAIR TUCK asked for direction to the 'Whereas' in question.

REPRESENTATIVE STORY directed attention to HJR 16, lines 25 and 26, which read, "**WHEREAS** the Hmong warriors were promised that they would be treated just like 26 other United States veterans;".

[1:28:25 PM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE TARR said that, since 82 Hmong veterans have received documents to obtain driver's licenses, evidence of service has been substantiated. She then referred to H.R. 371 Hmong Veterans' Naturalization Act of 2000 and said:

The law only applied to those who served with a U.S.-backed, Laotian-based special guerilla unit, or irregular forces, and served in the U.S. 'Secret Army' any time between February 28, 1961, to September 18, 1978, and were admitted into the United States through a political refugee status process from Laos, or is a veteran who meets all of the qualifications listed above at the time the veteran applied to enter the United States and was admitted as a refugee.

REPRESENTATIVE TARR asked whether Mr. Bowen would like to add anything.

[1:30:14 PM](#)

MR. BOWEN explained that the naturalization documents of individuals entering the U.S. for political reasons stated whether they were Laotian or Hmong soldiers. Veterans' Affairs has already acknowledged that there was a promise made to Hmong soldiers; it also uses the naturalization documents in determining military burial honors. He further explained that at the end of the Vietnam War, the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) flew 3,500 senior officers of the Hmong army, along with their families, from Laos to the U.S. He said that in order to do something of that magnitude, there had to have been a promise made. He said that Jerry Daniels, a CIA operative, had stayed in Thailand after the evacuation of the senior officers to facilitate the transfer of Hmong junior officers to the U.S., but he died before being able to testify.

CHAIR TUCK opined that the reaction of the CIA in bringing the Hmong officers to the U.S. expresses that there was a promise given.

[1:33:29 PM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE TARR moved to report HJR 16 out of committee with individual recommendations and the accompanying zero fiscal note. There being no objection, HJR 16 was reported out of the House Special Committee on Military and Veterans' Affairs.

[1:35:16 PM](#)

The committee took a brief at-ease.

[1:36:30 PM](#)

ADJOURNMENT

There being no further business before the committee, the House Special Committee on Military and Veterans' Affairs meeting was adjourned at 1:36 p.m.